

MISSING: Black males in the classroom

Black Issues Conference Proposal
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As a young African-American female preparing to finalize my undergraduate career and enter into a classroom to teach elementary school, I recently took a moment to consider my own education. Who were my teachers and what did they impart to me? Were they simply facilitators of learning or role models and a reflection of the culture and values with which I was familiar? In that moment of recall I acknowledged two very important things that in my immaturity I hadn't marked as significant at the time, but I can easily note their lasting impact today. The first—In five years of primary school, 3 years of middle school, four years of high school, and almost four years of college I have been taught by exactly seven African-American teachers or professors. Out these seven educators, only one of them has been an African-American male. Throughout my primary and secondary education my graduating class was roughly 30% African-American with approximately half to a third of them being African-American males. Only one of those males would be initiated into National Honors Society with me and the same young man would be the only African-American male in my class to graduate our high school in the top 25 as well. I wonder now, what could have been if my classmates would have had a strong black male to look up to in the classroom? What could he have made them see in themselves that a teacher who did not share their ethnic and cultural background could not?

In 2012 the U.S. Department of Education reported statistics showing while 17% of public school students were African-American, only 7% of public school teachers were black and less than 2% of those teachers were black males. Shown in another way, less than 1 in 50 educators in the public school sector are African American males. The Secretary of Education has called African-American males as

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educators, “a rarity.” Each year as the nation grows more diverse, the teaching force becomes less so in both gender and ethnic background. Some chalk the lack of interest in education as a career choice for black males due to the low salary. This is certainly one facet of many that may dissuade interest. Culturally, black students are pushed to attain what are considered more profitable, thus “more successful” careers. Especially true for the black male who is traditionally looked to as a family’s provider. Additionally, when coming from an impoverished community many minorities maintain a mindset of getting out instead of coming back to the communities left behind that still need help.

The lack of black male teachers is complex and multifaceted; however, the consequence remains the same. Disciplinary action data in Tennessee show a staggering 21.1% of black males suspended from school compared to a mere 4.7% of white males suspended from 2009-2010. Academically, only 9% of black male 8th graders in Tennessee score at or above proficient in the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) test in Reading. 26% of white male 8th graders in Tennessee score at or above proficient in this same test. This data is almost identical to results found in the mathematics section of NAEP—10% for black males, 31% for white males. More black male teachers in the classroom equates to more black male leaders for young black male students to model themselves after. Young males deserve the opportunity to see older black men in a role seldom advertised or applauded by the media—one of success, intelligence, and transformational leadership.

Several federal initiatives through the Department of Education have been passed in order to recruit 80,000 African-American male teachers by 2015. Many of these focus on increasing the salary for new teachers. These new teachers may come through traditional education programs in universities or alternative routes. One such alternative route that is working relentlessly to stimulate the flow of black males to the classroom is Teach For America. Teach For America has worked specifically to diversify their applicant pool and draw in more black males. In a program presented at the Black Issues Conference 2013: Divided We Fall, Together

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We Stand, I hope to convey the message of the lasting impact that outstanding black male leadership can have in a classroom, especially on young black male students. I believe this message holds a special importance to the audience that can be found at the University of Tennessee because the undergraduate years are a pivotal time in life in which we will decide our careers. Students should be made aware of all their choices and what impact those choices have the potential to make. The program will include current and former Teach For America African American male corps members. The set up will include a look into the state of Black males in Tennessee and a question and answer session after the speakers have spoken about their experiences as former students, teachers and current leaders in the state.